



+

## Feral Dogs & Cats



### History of Invasion

Pets are categorized according to their relationship with their human owners. The first order of ownership can be considered as homebound pets. **These** are pets that are completely dependant on their owners and are found on the premises. **I**f the pet is allowed to wander, but still is dependant on the owner for food and shelter, it is known as a free-roaming pet. **I**f the pet is completely free of **its** owner to roam and has minimal contact with humans then it is categorized as feral. If this feral state continues, the pet and its descendants will then become **completely** independent of humans, and over time **be considered "wild" animals**.

On the nation's forests **s** the influx of feral dogs (*Canis familiaris*) and cats (*Felis domesticus*) has become a social and cultural challenge. On the Caribbean National Forest a high **incidence** of pet abandonment **continues to** occur, **increasing** the amount of feral pets observations; **there are no indications that this situation will improve in the near-future**. This problem can be traced to an uncontrolled breeding pet population within human habitations that leads to a high number of releases of unwanted individual **animals**.



Feral dogs and cats occur throughout Puerto Rico's main and smaller islands.



## Identification

Feral cats are house cats living in the wild and are small in stature weighing from 3 to 8 pounds. The cats usually stand from 8 to 12 inches at the shoulder and 14 to 24 inches long with the tail adding another 8 to 12 inches. Colors range from black to white to orange, and an amazing variety of combinations in between.

Feral dogs in appearance are difficult to distinguish from domestic dogs. The primary feature that distinguishes feral dogs is the degree of reliance or dependence on humans, and in some respects, their behavior toward people.

## Biology and description of problem

Feral dogs are more highly organized than **was** previously **understood**. **For instance, when they form into packs, rearing of young pups is typically** shared by several members of the pack. Survival of pups born during autumn and winter has been documented, even in areas with harsh winter weather. **Traveling** in packs or groups, **feral dogs often** have rendezvous sites **similar to** wolves.

Feral cats **can** produce 2 to 10 kittens during any month of the year. An adult female may produce 3 litters per year where food and habitat are sufficient. Feral cats **typically live for only** 3 to 5 years.

Feral dogs and cats prey on native species and compete for food that would otherwise be used solely to support native animals.

### Current Forest Service Research



Presently there is no research being conducted on feral cat and dog populations by the USDA Forest Service, Caribbean National Forest. There is an ongoing government effort shared by the Caribbean National Forest and the Wildlife Service of the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) to address the exotic species and the diseases they transfer for the entire island of Puerto Rico. These activities are supplemented by the efforts of public environmental groups that reside in northeastern Puerto Rico. Their work with mistreated pets and native species protection makes them ideal participants in this program.

### Literature Cited

Fitzwater, W.D., 1994. House cats (feral)-Prevention and control of wildlife damage. USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Animal Damage Control, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Henderson, F.R., 1978. Housecats. Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage, Kansas State University, Manhattan.

Green, J.S. and Gipson, P.S. 1994. Feral dogs-Prevention and control of wildlife damage. USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Animal Damage Control, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.